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The Dictator and the Pop Star

On a relentlessly rainy day in Santiago's Nuñoa District, Pamela Sepúlveda is getting ready to perform. She's wearing a big black sweater with silver beading on the shoulders and black leggings. She has long, messy hair, and she looks more Brooklyn than Chile. This is still a socially conservative country, and most women are still dressing like it's 1996: scrunchies and shoulder pads.

"Today we woke up late, went to the feria to see what they had. There wasn't much, so we came back with three lemons and made mashed potatoes from the box." Her *whatever* approach to food and nutrition isn't uncommon among young Chileans -- if mom's not there to add a small salad, a piece of fish, well then we might as well just eat the potatoes, damn it, because they're really the best part. Her apartment, on the other hand, stands out. She's not a fan of conservative decor, or 70s color schemes (orange, pink, loud) considered posh by rich young people here. Instead, there are boxes and boxes and stacks of stacks of old records. Instead, there are boxes upon boxes and stacks of old records. There are CDs, and books about graffiti, and record players and turntables. A poster of the 1980s dystopian cult film *Blade Runner* on the wall.

Tonight she'll play with her close friend Ana at a hip event in downtown Santiago, where teens and literati will gush over her music. A few months ago she played at South by Southwest on her first trip to the United States.

Yet her music -- the *indie-electronica*, the emo fans, and DIY sense of it all -- is an unintended consequence of Chile's darkest years: the 17-year military dictatorship. Sepúlveda's music is probably the last melody that Dictator Augusto Pinochet might have listened to. As a strong admirer of American capitalism, it was Pinochet's deepest desire to make Chileans into consumers -- self-sustained, profit making and apolitical. But it is precisely his rule that seeded Sepúlveda's style of music. Like other children who grew up in the city's poor *poplaciones* where Pinochet's secret service picked anyone looking too derelict or too much like an activist off the streets, Sepúlveda's mother kept her inside. There, she could do little but watch North American TV. She and her peers consumed Madonna videos and *The Smurfs* while other children around the world went outside to play. All that time inside, absorbing the bright colors of 80s pop culture, has made Sepúlveda's generation one of Chile's most creative. They've created a new melody—one based more on raw feeling and 80s style electronic music than explicit protest.

Sepúlveda's multilayered compositions are closer to the British art-folk musician Kate Bush, or Madonna at her most soulful ("Like a Prayer"), than the Latin super groups of her youth. But Sepúlveda, whose artistic name is Fakuta, maintains that her music is distinctly Chilean, despite its broader appeal. "Chileans, we have an intrinsic melancholy that's different than Brazilian saudade," she says, suggesting that theirs is sadder, informed more by rain and geographic isolation (ocean on one side, mountains on the other) than searing heat and rainforest humidity.

Sepúlveda makes music that is deceptively pleasant. Her compositions and lyrics evoke the experience of a big, over-planned party where the guests have only shown up for free food. At times oppressive, at others sweetly addictive, the regret in Fakuta's songs bring attention to relatable moments of heartbreak and *could have been's*. One of her most lonely and popular lyrics – "You won't follow me into my delusions or even to go buy bread" – is oft-tumbled by teenage girls and sensitive late-20s guys as a big block of text.

Her songs tend to open with bright synthesizers, then build into danceable tension, and finally resolve into a dreamy bridge. Her 80s roots shine through, as her songs are addictive in the same ineffable way that REM, Michael Jackson or even Tiffany (*I think we're alone now*) cuts are. She's drawn a growing audience of Spanish-speaking hipsters around North and South America. They're listening to her album *Al Vuelo* (In Flight) on ipods, laptops, and car stereos. Her music isn't political, but without her country's dictatorship, it could never have existed at all.

Sepúlveda's success, her growing pop prowess and spacious Santiago apartment are miles away from where she started. She grew up in the poor neighborhood of La Florida. She was born in 1982, a year before protests would start again against the country's decade-old dictatorship. Neighborhoods like La Florida were hotbeds of leftist activism, and as a result, scenes of government repression: gunshots, kidnappings, brutality.

This generation, the one Sepúlveda finds herself in, was never supposed to protest, let alone create art. They were supposed to carry all the self-defeatism of America's Gen X-ers and none of the reactive idealism of its millenials. Pinochet imported American free-market gurus like Milton Friedman to help him accelerate Chile's development and reorient the country away from its socialist roots and toward modernity.

There was a lot to undo. In the 1960s, Chile's most internationally known celebrities were folklorist and musician Violeta Parra, a woman who grew up poor in a region of the country that had been an indigenous stronghold in the 19th century, and Pablo Neruda, a Nobel Laureate and outspoken member of the communist party.

When Pinochet gained power in 1973 because of a US-backed military coup, his biggest desire was the change things. He had, after all, just ousted the first democratically elected socialist in Latin America. Before the coup, Chile had been an economically poor country with a rich literary and cultural tradition. Margaret Power is an American Professor who lived in Chile during the early years of the regime. "Up until that point, it had been such a relational culture. There was such a strong sense of "us". The family was hugely important. I think people felt they belonged to things."

Pinochet, in his desire for rapid economic growth, changed Chile's course. He was more interested in consumers than culture. He wanted a massive and robust free market that could fill the void that disappearing public life would leave.

"He expressed many times that he wasn't going to leave office until Chileans had learned to think differently," says Volk.

He was most threatened by the country's young activists – many of the people he disappeared in death camps or mass drownings in the Pacific Ocean were between the ages of 18 and 25.

Take, for instance, the example of Villa Grimaldi. Once an intellectual and cultural meeting place on the outskirts of Santiago, during the regime it became a torture and detention complex. Today, the site houses a memorial for the 3000 people who were disappeared during the country's years of military rule. Walking down the rows of commemorative plaques, one notices that the disappeared were typically quite young, many in their twenties, some in their teens.

Pinochet got rid of academic departments that weren't explicitly money making, so the arts were ignored or defunded. In 1983, for example, there were no Chilean archeologists, says Volk. But it was also not a place devoid of culture. People took risks, protested and published magazines like *Bicicleta* would appear and then be quickly forced to shut down. "The collective became something people feared," says Power. "Because there was fear someone inside the group could be an informant."

To a large extent, the regime's repressive atmosphere encouraged people to stay insular. Pinochet was successful in that regard. Many Chileans are individualistic. Some are a little security obsessed, as their positions in the economic pecking order are hard to maintain in a free market system. The upper class frequent Starbucks and pick up take-out from KFC. There are countless advertisements in Spanish for North American products, and a palpable sense of individualism among the city's metro riders. Commuters stare at the ground as they hurry from home to work back to home again: model self-protective consumers.

But among the country's sensitive and artistic young people, the ones who were babies or toddling in 1983, the year Pinochet reinstated the curfew, the plan didn't entirely work. By 2010, the activist-oriented youth were protesting everything from large-scale dam construction to overpriced college tuition. And their artistic counterparts had banded together to create their own record labels and write some of the most innovative indie-pop songs to come out of Latin America.

All that childhood time inside during the 80s, says Sepúlveda turned out to be like an extended creative cocoon. Chilean networks would broadcast hours of Michael Jackson and Madonna -- projecting a glittery pop universe that contrasted darkly with a new era of Pinochet's repression. MTV launched in 1981 and the music video was still a new and exciting concept. "We were stuck inside watching the screen," says Sepúlveda. "TV showed you a lot of really fantastic programs and movies and it was all imaginary, it was not like reality, which was a lot more," she pauses, "without so many colors."

Sepúlveda was a very shy little girl. She has visceral memories of taking the Santiago subway during rush hour and being forced into others' personal space. She loved to stay home and draw or make up songs. Creative expression became a respite from the tense urban environment.

During college she studied architecture, which she still practices from time to time when she's low on money. But now she's dedicated herself to music, running around the sprawling metropolis of Santiago for gigs that don't pay well. This might not be a big deal in a country like Germany or the UK or even in neighboring Argentina; but it is in Chile, because the middle class here is tiny, and hanging on by a thread. There are many, many poor people and very few rich people, and those in the middle are earning extra degrees and working overtime so they can afford to maintain their social position.

But Sepúlveda's passion is music, and she finds herself in a strong community of fellow performers who support each other. Like the political groups and artist collectives that came before her, she and her friends, like Ana Gallardo Pinto and Daniela Saldías, wanted to write their own songs. But they received almost no music education at school. So they listened hard to the music they loved, and then went to thrift stores and music shops, where they found cheap used synths and bass guitars. Not much, but enough to teach oneself the rudiments of pop -- which is by its nature democratic -- easily reproduced and accessible.

Soon there was a small scene in Santiago made up of Do-It-Yourself, 80s influenced indie pop acts. This now well-known group of young performers -- Javiera Mena, Gepe and a group called Dënver -- began to perform together. "All of us started to make music when the industry was completely dead in Chile," Chilean mega-producer Alex Anwandter said in an interview in 2012. He added, "That translated to... an artistic search that didn't correspond to any industry criteria. It didn't have to comply with any standard. And for some reason, it has resonated with people and succeeded."

"In the beginning, we were the audience for each other," says Sepúlveda. In 2010, Sepúlveda and Saldías helped form a DIY record label called Michita Rex. The label's mission statement says, "Inspired by the principles of self-determination, reciprocity and collaborative work, Michita Rex aims to expand and diversify the possibilities of listening."

In time, the new sound, equal parts 80s devotion and nostalgia for a lost past, spread far beyond Chile's borders.

Violeta Parra would be proud -- Pinochet anxious.

In 2008, a college student in Phoenix, Arizona named Carlos Reyes launched a music site called *Club Fonograma*. Reyes, like Sepúlveda, spent a lot of time inside. He had moved to Arizona as a 12 year old from the northern Mexican state of Durango. He recalls the move to the US as "painful and traumatic." When Reyes was a young teenager, his mother bought an old Mac computer from a yard sale, and a little while later his uncle installed dial-up Internet. From there, everything in his life changed. He began blogging to imitate end of the year top ten lists he'd seen on Mexican TV, and to counter his feelings of isolation. "The internet was about escapism," he says, "But for me, the idea was to use it to create something."

While Chilean kids had been kept inside by their fearful parents, Reyes stayed home because of Phoenix's oppressive heat and notorious urban sprawl.

Reyes loved Latin Alternative pop music – a growing genre in the early 2000s. He loved that its lyrics weren't overly earnest like in *ranchero* or *salsa*, or ultra-macho like in Mexican rock, but that it was performed in his native Spanish. Over time, Reyes formed an identity he calls *hipster cholo*. Just as bands in Chile were reaching competence with their instruments and songwriting, Reyes began accepting demos, to his *Club Fonograma* website.

A few years before launching *CF*, Reyes fell in love with Chilean pop. Sepúlveda was just starting out, back then, but her friend Daniel Riveros released *Gepinto* in 2005. Reyes says that album, along with Javiera Mena's *Esquemas Juveniles*, established Chilean pop, and defined the genre as based in folkloric forms with call-backs to the 80s: Victor Jarra meets New Wave. And it was art born out of isolation and anomie, like his own writing habit. "To this day, I see blogging as a very personal and intimate thing," says Reyes over g-chat, his preferred form of communication. "It was never my ambition to have a lot of people reading. But people showed up."

It was Reyes who saw the potential of the Internet to bring Latin pop, and particularly Chilean musicians, to global fame. Through his downloadable mixtapes, what started out as home-studio recordings; a little synth here, an earnest lyric there, was transmitted all over the world.

Soon, his website was drawing acclaim, and Chilean artists were among the most prominently featured. *Club Fonograma* won an IMAS award for "best music website," and was deemed the Latin version of Pitchfork, an international tastemaker for independent music. At this point, most of the musicians the blog would feature regularly were Chilean -- even going so far as to release a semi-annual mixtape in which almost half the artists hailed from that part of the Southern Cone.

"I think it's the strength of the friendships in the Chilean scene that has allowed this movement to bloom. One will produce another's album. And then that person will turn around and direct her friend's music video." In a country with no real music industry and the legacy of a repressive and fiercely capitalist dictatorship, Reyes believes that Chile's music scene has exploded due to its artists' communitarian bent and the growth of the Internet.

Reyes thinks that like Spain's *movida*, the cultural flowering following Franco's death, the Chilean pop wave is about fully releasing the dictator's shadow. "In Chile people were suppressed for so long. This is the final push to let go and move on."

The Chilean indie-pop wave continues to gain followers. From Berlin to Tijuana, and in clubs and basements all over the Chile Pinochet held onto so tightly.

When Sepúlveda released her album "Al Vuelo" (In Flight) in 2011, Club Fonograma lauded it. "With its mesmerizingly clever compositions, the blissful majesty that is Al Vuelo will position Fakuta in the line of cream of the crop of Chilean stars, in the meantime bringing us transcendental anthems of monumental proportions." The reviewer noted that this album was long in the making – Sepúlveda spent two years in the studio – and that the songs seemed like they'd been gestating for a long while.

Tonight, Sepúlveda will perform for an audience of teenagers and artists at a hip book launch for Chilean author Camila Gutierrez, whose blue eyes and blond hair signify that she is part of the country's moneyed class. Gutierrez's family is part of the Chilean oligarchy; the kinds of people who did very well during the dictatorship. But her book, which began as an anonymous blog, is about defying both church and family to experiment with sex, drugs and unconventional relationships. Its themes of breaking away to become one's own person have deeply resonated with Chilean young people, and in 2012 it became a film called, "Young and Wild." One of Sepúlveda's songs was used in the soundtrack, and tonight she'll perform it to a crowd of hundreds of artsy teenagers – some of them queer, some locked in a make out, almost all with long bangs and wide-frame glasses.

She'll take a cab paid for by a North American publishing company to get to the venue. The omnipresent Chilean rain will continue to pour down throughout her performance. The space will be freezing, because despite Chile's rapid economic growth, central heating is still a luxury. But Sepúlveda will battle the chill and play the first few chords of her synth. And everything will melt away, into a transcendent pop epiphany. This will be her moment.

Source List for *The Dictator and the Pop Star*

Pamela Sepúlveda

Carlos Reyes

Steven Volk

Margaret Power

Milton Mahan

Mariana Rodriguez

Danko Ulloa

Carlos Cáceres

Virna Díaz